

Local elites at the edge of an empire: transformations in landscape and material culture between the Scheldt basin and the North Sea (ca. AD 200 – 800)

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The area between the North Sea and the Scheldt basin has always formed a remote area within the Roman Empire. From the 1st to the start of the 3rd century, as part of the *civitas Menapiorum*, it was characterized by large-scale agricultural activities, both farming and husbandry, as well as salt exploitation near the North Sea coast. Embedded in the global Roman market economy, this peasant society was controlled by state and landowning elites, in which social status was mainly expressed by agrarian exploitations.

At the end of the 2nd century, the scale of exploitation started to drop. The 3rd century arose as a catalyst of change in which the Roman landowning elite culture shifted towards a military based one. This change coincided with a shift in both landscape and material culture in this part of the now-called *Belgica Secunda*. The abandonment of previously exploited lands and the erection of the Late Roman coastal defence (the so-called *Litus Saxonicum*) are some of those changes that can be observed. Military styles became more important to express social status, e.g. in belts and brooches, whereas the influence of agricultural elites had become almost absent. In the 4th and 5th centuries, continued settlements and reoccupation concentrated along the rivers and roads that were the centre of the military-economic network, and remained so in the Early Middle Ages. Mediterranean imports are no longer found in bulk in the settlements, but are replaced by mid-range regional imports, such as Argonne samian ware, Eifel products, and vessels produced in Westphalia.

During the 5th century, the area was part of the development of Merovingian power as the hinterland of Childeric's domain, based in Tournai, and it would maintain this position during the later Merovingian period. While the habitation pattern and structure remained similar to the Late Roman phase, a significant change took place in the burial practice with the emergence of the *Reihengräberfelder*. These cemeteries, and not the settlements, form the locations where social status was expressed, as shown by the luxurious regional and supra-regional imported grave goods, the different grave types and topographical structure of the cemetery. A second major transformation in the Merovingian era becomes visible from the 7th century onwards, with the arrival of Christian missionaries. They founded churches and abbeys, which received royal domains or bought private lands with royal money, as a material basis for their conversional work. Because of the quickly growing prestige of Christianity and its first propagators, landownership became once again an important part of elite identity, since these abbeys and churches were all land based.

Over time, the region to the northwest of the river Scheldt has witnessed a transformation from a well 'Romanised' agriculture-focused provincial periphery to a militarised region and back to being ruled by land-based elites. With this paper, we would like to illustrate that, while geographically the region can be considered a periphery, it has been at the centre of some significant sociocultural changes in Late Antiquity.